

## SERMON XXIV.

*Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands.—VER. 11.*

I SHALL not open these words by way of exposition ; but shall only single out a point which is of great use, and which I shall handle and finish at this time. And it is this, What use and advantage and improvement believers should make of their having been in the state of nature, as you know all once were, whether converted sooner or later. ‘Wherefore,’ saith the Apostle here, ‘remember that ye were once Gentiles in the flesh.’

There are two ways of handling this doctrine :—

The one is by shewing the end that God hath in leaving his children in such an estate and condition ; and with that I will not at all meddle here at this time.

The second is the use and improvement that is to be made of that condition by them. And what use or improvement may be made of a man’s sinful condition, while he was in the state of nature, the same also may withal be made of those sins a man hath fallen into since he was in the state of grace.

The Holy Ghost here, you see, doth exhort us to *remember*. ‘Wherefore remember,’ saith he. He had discoursed at large of the state of nature in the former verses, and, saith he, Let this for ever stick with you, let it be ever in your eye : ‘Wherefore remember.’

And we may make the following improvements of what the Apostle enjoins to these Ephesians :—

*First*, It should serve us to this end, to magnify the greatness and freeness of God’s grace to us. Do but see what Paul saith—for I shall give you his instance and example—in 1 Tim. i. 12. I thank Christ, saith he, for putting me into the ministry. Why so ? Because I was ‘a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious ;’ but, saith he, ‘I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly through unbelief ; and the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.’ If a man had been but in Paul’s heart, and but seen when he considered that, ‘I that was a blasphemer, &c., obtained mercy ;’ how he brought *blasphemer* and *mercy* together, and what a mixture of affections it wrought in his heart ! My brethren, that is that which God aims at, to bring contraries at once into a man’s soul, and by them to work the most glorious mixture of affections in us, both of confusion in ourselves, and of triumph in the freeness of his grace. To that end, he brings in and preserveth the sense both of his own free grace and of our own vileness, to work this mixture of affection in us. In this same 2d of the Ephesians, where the Apostle had discoursed of their having been in this natural condition, you shall find that he saith twice, ‘by grace ye are

saved ;' he contents not himself to have said it once, but he said it again : so you have it, ver. 5, ' by grace ye are saved ;' so you have it again, ver. 8, ' for by grace ye are saved.' If thou hast acknowledged it once, acknowledge it again. You know that rule,—which is an infallible one, and everlastingly holds true,—that of the Apostle in Rom. v., where sin hath abounded, there grace aboundeth much more. I will not stand to enlarge any more upon that. For it is one of the ends that God had, which I will not now insist upon, for which he did suffer his children to lie in such a condition.

*Secondly,* You may improve it too for a help to your faith. Though the guilt of sin is in itself, take it in a direct way, one of the greatest opposites to faith that can be, yet God improves it in the heart of a believer to be the greatest help to faith many ways that could have been. As—

1. It helpeth our faith in respect of a sense of our own emptiness. There is nothing that doth move a man to self-emptiness more, or gives him a greater experience of it, than the consideration of that condition he was once in by nature. For, to be sure, then thou hadst not the least power, not the least ability, not the least faculty, to think one good thought, or to put forth one holy aim towards God, to do anything that might help forward thine own salvation, or magnify and advance the glory of God. There was but one mean to salvation, and that was, to believe. God provided a remedy in Jesus Christ, a remedy without us which requireth nothing within us but faith. Take any man that was in his natural estate, let him but remember that, and he must needs remember this, that he had not the least power to believe ; for he was dead, he was empty of all grace, and abilities to exercise grace. And therefore the Apostle saith here in ver. 8 of the 2d of the Ephesians, ' By grace ye are saved through faith,' and that not of yourselves neither, ' it is the gift of God.' He makes this a corollary from this, that they had been ' dead in sins and trespasses,' that they had formerly been in an unregenerate state and condition. A man by the consideration thereof hath experience, that though God provided a remedy, yet he had not a hand nor a heart to lay hold upon it, but he should, if left to himself, have perished everlastingly ; and that as God found him a Christ, so he must find him hands to lay hold upon him, or he had been undone.

2. It helps forward this persuasion in faith, which is the spirit of faith, that a man can never be justified by any works of his own : and, I say, this doth naturally rise from the consideration of his once being in the state of nature. It is the strongest argument—I will not much insist upon it, only so much as may now clear it—to persuade or convince the soul that he can never be justified by his own righteousness, though he hath never so much given him afresh and anew by God. Why? Because he was once in the state of nature. ' He hath saved us,' saith the Apostle, in Tit. iii. 3-5, ' not by works of righteousness which we have done ;' why? by what doth he prove it? ' Because we were sometimes ourselves foolish and disobedient,' &c. (he mentioneth their natural condition in the verses before.) Our once having been in the state of nature, it spoils, it disableth all holiness wrought in us by Christ ever to justify us before God. My brethren, the argument why we cannot be justified by our own works doth not only lie in this, that our works are imperfect ; for know, they shall be perfect one day, and God if he pleased might make them perfect here : but suppose he had made us perfectly holy in this life, yet notwithstanding still we should not be justified by it. Why? Because we were once in the state of nature, ungodly persons,

and this righteousness which we have now is a borrowed righteousness, by virtue of a new covenant, the covenant of grace, and therefore it can never avail to justify, as works under the covenant of works did, for I say it is but borrowed. And therefore see what the Apostle saith, in this Eph. ii. 9, 10. Do but mark the scope of those two verses; it is punctual to what I drive at, and now have mentioned. We are not saved by works, saith he, lest any man should boast. Why are we not saved by works? Have believers no works? Yes, but they can never be saved by works. Why? 'For,' saith he, 'we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works.' Here is his reason, and his scope is manifestly this: saith he, There was a time when you had no grace, no holiness, nor nothing in you, you were utterly dead in sins and trespasses; so he saith in the former verse. Well, now you have holiness wrought in you, you are a workmanship created in Christ Jesus to good works, but because it is newly created in Christ Jesus, hence therefore you can never be saved by it. This is a manifest and clear corollary and deduction from this truth, that once they were in a natural condition, as we all were. For if we receive a new workmanship created to good works in Christ Jesus, it is then merely by grace; and we therefore receive it by Christ Jesus, because once we were dead in sins and trespasses; we were in our natural condition, hence therefore these works that flow from this new workmanship can never save or justify a man.

3. It doth teach us in the way of believing one lesson, which we should never have learned but only for the consideration that we were once in the state of nature. It is the highest lesson in faith's school,—so I may call it,—and it is this: that whensever a man comes to Christ for justification, he should look upon himself as an ungodly person; that although he have never so much grace in him, yet because he once was in the state of nature, and an ungodly person, he is to consider himself, as in himself, so for ever. There is that clear place for it, in Rom. iv. 5. The Apostle had proved, and he doth prove there, that we are justified only by faith; and he proves it from the example of Abraham our father, and he takes the example of Abraham after he had lived long in the state of grace; for he quoteth that scripture in Genesis, 'He believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness,' ver. 3. Now what saith he, 'Not unto him that worketh, but to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly,'—he works this out from Abraham's example,—'his faith is accounted for righteousness.' So that now Abraham when he did come to believe twenty thirty years after he was converted unto God, he still believed upon that God that justifieth the ungodly. Saith Abraham, I was an ungodly person once, and an idolater, and whatever grace I have now in me, whatever I have done since, that goes upon another account; but still as in myself, when I come to look for justification and for righteousness, I look upon myself as an ungodly person, as if I had no works at all. And that is the meaning of it, 'To him that worketh not,'—that is, that regardeth not in the point of justification, that is, as if he wrought not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly,—'is his faith accounted unto him for righteousness.' This is the faith that is the faith of righteousness, and we should never have had occasion for such a faith as this, had not it been for that condition in which we all lay in by nature.

4. It may help us against temptations of all sorts. Thou that livedst in thy natural condition, it may be many years, and didst begin to see thyself a lost man without the Lord Jesus, it was a very bold adventure of thee

when thou didst first put forth thy hand to lay hold upon Jesus Christ. Thou camest then trembling to Christ for pardon of sin, when thou sawest nothing in thyself, nothing at all, there was not any suspicion of grace to be in thee, nothing but the contrary; and yet thou didst believe then. It may be God fell upon thy soul, assured thee of his love too, upon thy believing and throwing thyself upon him. Mark, thou canst never be put more to it—take thy whole course to thy dying day—than thou wast then; for the worst temptation that can befall thee is that thou art in such a state and condition. Why, when thou didst first begin to believe, thou wert in that condition, that is certain; therefore now it is but putting forth such an act of faith now in the midst of such a temptation as thou didst put forth at first, or as all believers do put forth at first; it is but to live by that faith at worst which thou didst at first begin to live by. My brethren, men use to ease their faith by looking to what is in themselves: but look upon yourselves as ungodly; suppose yourselves so, suppose the worst,—I do not say, take it for granted that your state is such, in yourselves you are such;—but suppose it; it is but making that venture upon Christ which you made at first. So that now that first act of faith thou putteth forth upon the consideration of thy former state and condition, doth but teach thee and prompt thee what faith thou art to live by in all temptations whatsoever.

5. It is a great help to strengthen a man's faith for perseverance. Thou wentest on perhaps, as many of the saints have done, many years in a way of sin; thou canst not be, nor art now, in a worse condition than thou wert then in; the Lord did then, when thou wert broke, set thee up again. Why, he will do so again though thou art fallen into sin: all the sins of thy whole life lay upon thee then, and thou camest to God for the pardon of them. What doth the Apostle say in Rom. v. ? It is a use he makes of this very thing. 'If when we were enemies,' saith he, ver. 10, 'we were reconciled unto God by the death of his Son.' Did God pardon you, saith he, when you first came to him, having lain in your natural condition all your days before, being enemies unto him? Now, saith he, being reconciled, being now entered into an estate of covenant and friendship with him, 'much more,' saith he, 'being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life;' that is, he putteth the emphasis both by comparing the effectualness of Christ's death and Christ's life in us, as I have elsewhere shewn. But what I quote it now for is, that if God pardoned you then, when you were enemies, and came to him out of your natural condition,—therefore remember but that condition,—surely now having reconciled you to himself, you shall be saved by the life, by the intercession of Christ. My brethren, if we should remain in a mixed condition of sinning, such as we have here in this life, even to eternity, God could pardon us, and he would do it. But relieve your hearts thus, make but a comparison of what you were in your former estate before you were converted, and make the comparison thus: I went on many years in such a way of sin, I knew not God; God all that while loved me, his heart was upon me, and he relieved himself all that while with this: I will let him alone, for I shall have him come to me in the end; and, my brethren, it is certain that God did so. Before ever Paul was converted, God had an eye upon him all that while; he had appointed the time in which he would turn him. Answerably now, thou hast still sin in thee which breaks out again and again, and thou thinkest it will undo thee. How doth God relieve himself now? There is a time, saith God, that I will take this soul up into heaven, free him from all sin, and it is but bearing with him, and pardoning of him

till then ; I did it before, I did but bear with him, and forbear him till my Spirit turned him to me ; now it is but bearing with him so much the longer, till such time as my Spirit shall fully sanctify him, and he be taken up unto myself. Thus, I say, help thy faith : and the consideration of God's love to thee and to his children before they were converted, is an evident strengthening of our faith.

6. And lastly, it may help our faith, by moving us to take the faster hold upon Christ. My brethren, though it is the power of the Holy Ghost that doth help us to believe, and gives us strength to believe, yea, every degree of strength,—that we take a faster hold upon Christ every day than other, it is from the Holy Ghost,—yet the Holy Ghost useth motives and considerations, he deals with a man herein as with a reasonable creature. Now, when a man shall look back upon his whole life, and consider the sins of his unregenerate condition, and all his sins since ; may that man think with himself, If all these sins should now be mine, and I should answer for them myself, what a condition should I be in ! But here is my Lord and Saviour Christ, who frees me from them all. This moves a man still to run to him as to a city of refuge, to lay faster hold upon him, to renew stronger acts of faith every day than other. And remember it for that end. If a man hang upon the top of a pinnacle, as I may so express it, the further off the ground it is, and the more danger he sees in falling, the faster hold he will be sure to take ; so is it here. And that is the reason, my brethren, why poor souls when they come first out of their natural condition, make so eagerly and desirably after Christ, and after faith ; it is because they have all the sins of their unregenerate condition at once before them, which doth drive them to the Lord Jesus Christ : to him they run as unto a city of refuge, the cry of their bloody transgressions pursuing them. Therefore now that faith should grow every day stronger and stronger, we have a greater motive unto it, for we have every day before us a greater prospect of sins. And so in all these respects it may serve to help forward faith. 'Wherefore remember,' saith the Apostle, &c.

*Thirdly,* Another benefit is, love unto Jesus Christ. These advantages which I mention, many of them may arise from sins committed since God called you, as well as before, and so may this. You know that Mary loved much because, it is said, 'much was forgiven her.' I will give you an instance of Paul, in that place I quoted even now, 1 Tim. i. 13, though not to that purpose I now quote it. I, saith he, before was 'a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious, but I obtained mercy,' &c. ; 'and,' saith he, 'the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.' What means he here by faith and love ? Doth he mean the faithfulness and love of Christ unto him ? No, but faith and love in himself wrought toward Jesus Christ ; and his meaning is this, that look as I, having been a persecutor, and a blasphemer, and injurious, as I had abounded in all these before, now when God did turn me, the grace of Jesus Christ did make this advantage of it, it made me love him the more. 'The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant in faith and love.' And remember this : the love God shewed thee when he first turned thee to him, all the time before, as I said even now, his heart and eye was upon thee, himself had appointed a time, a fulness of time, in which he resolved to turn thee ; and as he set a fulness of time for Christ Jesus his Son to come into the world and to take our nature upon him, so he hath set in his eternal purpose and decree a fulness of time in which the Holy Ghost shall come into every man's

heart to turn him, and he faileth not a moment of the time ; as Christ failed not a moment, but he came in due time, as the text saith, Rom. v. I say, all the while before still his heart was upon thee ; and as he saw Nathanael under the fig-tree, so he saw thee when thou wast in such and such courses, and he thought with himself, Well, this sinner will come home one day, and oh, as the prophet Jeremiah speaks, when shall it once be ! He longed for that time, for that time in which thy soul should actually be married unto Jesus Christ by his Holy Spirit ; and when that time was come which he longed for so much, when that thou didst but begin to think of turning to him, and, as it is said of Ephraim, in Jer. xxxi. 20, didst but smite upon thy thigh, when thou beganst first to express but the least affection to God, the least purpose of turning to him, his bowels stirred within him : ‘ I do remember nime still ; I will have mercy upon him, saith the Lord.’

*Fourthly*, It likewise may be a treasury to thee for matter of godly sorrow. My brethren, it is a very great error that we may cease mourning for sin when it is once pardoned. No, it is the fittest season then to mourn ; and of all graces else take your fill of that. As I heard one once say, when he was upon his deathbed, a day or two before he died,—and as he did indeed spend the time before,—saith he, ‘ I shall not mourn in heaven,’ and so he took his fill of mourning, out of the sense of the love of God for the sins he had committed here. Therefore now be humbled for sin, mourn for it ; if not in order to the pardon of it, which thou art assured of, yet to the further manifestation of that pardon ; if not in relation to that, yet because it is pardoned ; as you have it, Ezek. xvi. 63, ‘ That thou mayest be confounded,’ saith he, ‘ and never open thy mouth more, when I am pacified towards thee for all thine abominations.’ It is a very great question whether the love of God should break our hearts more for the sins we have committed since we have turned unto him, or those committed before ? There are aggravations on both sides, which we may take in their proportion, to work upon our hearts. If we consider the sins since God wrought upon us, there is this to aggravate them, that we have sinned against that God that hath manifested his love to us, and we have sinned against the manifestation of that love. But then, on the other hand, the sins before conversion have this heightening in them too, to make us mourn, that though we knew not then that God loved us, yet certainly he bore a love to us all the while, and out of that love he forbore us, and out of that love he intended to convert us and to turn us unto him.

*Fifthly*, We may improve it for this end, to make us more zealous for God. It is an improvement which may be made either of our living long in our natural condition, (we may remember it for that end, to quicken our zeal for God,) or it is an improvement also of sins committed since we knew God. It was this that fired Paul so much, inflamed his heart so much, that made him labour more abundantly than all the apostles. None of the apostles persecuted the church of Christ. Peter denied him it is true, and it was a means certainly to intend his zeal ; but, saith Paul, none persecuted it but I : which, as it laid him low, so it made him labour more than they all ; he thought he had never done enough. It is the motive which the apostle Peter useth, 1 Pet. iv. 2, 3, ‘ That he,’ speaking of a Christian, ‘ should no longer live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God ; for the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles.’ As if he had said, If it were fit for you to have the pleasures of sin, yet you may be content with what you have had ; let

that suffice you, that you have spent so much and so long time in it; you owe nothing to the flesh, therefore it may very well suffice that it hath had so much of your time already, that for the time past of your life you have wrought the will of the Gentiles; that is, have wrought the lusts of the Gentiles. Now, saith he, you should no longer live the rest of your time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. As it is a strong motive to be more holy, the less of a man's time remaineth in the flesh,—that is the Apostle's argument; 'The day is short,' saith he, and so in Heb. x., 'by how much the more the day approacheth,'—so it is as strong an argument, by how much more of his time past hath been lost unto God. As by how much the less is to come, for the time to come, should be a motive unto holiness; so, so much of the time past spent in a vain conversation should be a motive too. In 1 Pet. i. 18, having been 'redeemed from our vain conversation,'—that is the Apostle's expression there,—'therefore,' saith he, 'pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: therefore be holy, as he is holy.' That is the exhortation he makes, and these are the motives he useth; compare but the 15th, 16th, and 18th verses together. Such grounds as lie fallow, when you till them you expect the greater crop from them; and so doth God from those who have spent much of their days in sin; and certainly that soil that doth bring forth weeds most, will also be fruitful of herbs when it is sown; and this God expects.

*Lastly,* You may make this improvement of the remembrance that yourselves were once Gentiles in the flesh, as the Apostle here speaks. Hast thou any friends that thou hast prayed for long, that are still in their natural condition, and thou thinkest there is no hope of them? Do but remember what thou thyself once wert, and how long; remember how long many of those that are now in heaven did lie in that condition ere God called them. 'Such,' saith the Apostle, in 1 Cor. vi. 11, 'were some of you.' This is a certain truth, that there is never a sermon that hath power in it but the devil is afraid of every man in the church that is in his natural condition; he knows not but that the Holy Ghost may seize upon that man at that time: answerably, have thou hope at every sermon of those whom thou hast prayed for. In 2 Tim. ii. 24, speaking of the ministers of the gospel, he saith, they must be 'gentle, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure,' saith he, 'will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.' If there be but a peradventure that God may do it, and though they oppose too,—for so the Apostle's expression is,—yet be patient, saith he, wait; so the ministers of God should do for those they preach to, and so shouldest thou do for those whom thou prayest for, and hast sought God to turn them. As Paul saith to wives, he bids them not to leave their husbands, in 1 Cor. vii. 16; sends them home to them again with a 'What knowest thou, O wife, but thou mayest be a means to turn thy husband?' So, hast thou prayed, and prayed long, for a child, for a husband, for a friend, and still they oppose,—put the case so, for so Paul doth in that place of Timothy,—yea, suppose they have been under a powerful means, and have not been won by the word; the apostle Peter puts that case too, in 1 Pet. i. 3; yet after all this, 'What knowest thou?' Still pray, still use means; it may be, some little cross, though they have had many to break their hearts, shall work more than all the rest; some by-speech spoken may fall into their hearts, and turn them, when many pertinent exhortations that respect their conditions avail not, though it may be thou hast wondered how they could sit under such exhortations without

being moved. And when they have not been won by the word, saith Peter, 1 Pet. iii. 1, 2, they may be won by thy conversation.

And so much now for this point, which is indeed a point of great use unto us, and which we are apt, when we have lain long in the state of unregeneracy, to forget, and sail out of the sight of it. You see the Apostle here exhorts these Ephesians to the remembrance of it, and himself, the highest Christian that ever was, lived in the continual sight of it. These and such like uses are to be made of it.